

He used to clean hospitals. Now he's had a brush with the Queen

BY WILLIAM COOK

Born on Merseyside, Christian Furr went to art school at Wirral College and Leicester Poly. But, like so many art students with dreams of fame and wealth, he had to spend the next five years scraping a bare living from odd jobs, the occasional grant cheque and, now and again, a commission for a portrait.

Then last month, at just 28, he painted the most famous woman in the world — in the old outhouse he rents in a desolate east London backstreet. It's tucked behind a disused factory and hemmed in by a railway line; it's cold, it's cramped and it's seen better days. But for Christian, it's only £10 a week, it's his first proper studio and on one paint-splattered wall of it, hangs his gracious portrait of Her Majesty The Queen.

It's difficult to equate Christian's formal and comfortably old-fashioned study with the streetwise-looking bloke who painted it, but then his tastes have always been rather more conservative than those of his peers. In an era when artistic status is bestowed upon piles of bricks and dead sheep, his favourite painters include Old English Masters such as Reynolds and Gainsborough. 'I've been accused of being an anachronism,' he says, in his soft, sing-song Scouse.

In those hard years after college — he worked as a removal man and a hospital cleaner — there were times when he was tempted to pack it all in. Particularly when he had to paint over old pictures because he couldn't afford new canvases. 'You learn about life through failure. You don't learn about it through success.'

And then, in November 1994, came the phone-call of a lifetime, from the Royal Over-Seas League in London, a Commonwealth club which awards scholarships to artists and musicians and which had already commissioned a portrait — of a former chairman — from Christian.

'Are you sitting down?' asked the chap from the League. 'I am now,' replied Christian. 'The Queen would like you to paint her portrait.' As patron of the League, Her Majesty had chosen Christian herself — from a shortlist of four artists who showed at the League's annual exhibition. The first thing Christian did was ring his mum. Mrs Furr laughed — then screamed. Christian told her to calm down and have a cup of tea.

A couple of months later, Christian arrived at the gates of Buckingham Palace. 'I must admit the policeman smiled when I arrived in my red Beetle.' First stop was a meeting with the Queen's Private Secretary. 'He versed me in the protocol. He let me know what the forms of address would be: Your Majesty the first time you meet her, and Ma'am thereafter.'

Etiquette aside, Christian was given a remarkably free hand. The portrait's location — the Yellow Drawing Room — was predetermined, but he was allowed to rearrange the furniture. 'It was left to my aesthetic sensibilities,' he says. 'I had a rough idea, but it meant sort of moving things around a bit.' He also chose what clothes the Queen would wear. True to form, his



Christian Furr with his portrait of the Queen.

selection was ultra-traditional — 'It's an ideal opportunity for an artist like me to be able to paint somebody in all that finery.'

On the morning of the first sitting, he woke before his alarm clock, dressed in his normal workday clothes then drove to Britain's most prestigious address. He spent a couple of hours in the Yellow Drawing Room, preparing his paints and setting the scene. The Queen arrived at around 11.30. 'I just said, "Like, y'know, yeah, really pleased

to meet you and honoured, Your Majesty."

He found her 'a lovely lady — she put me at my ease. When you first see her, she has this expression which you see sometimes in photographs of her — sort of grimmish. But, as soon as she laughs, it's like a sunny day lighting up the whole room. She's got a really nice smile. She's quite witty as well. We were talking about painting, and I mentioned the Annigoni paintings. They're probably the most well-known paintings of

her — there's one in the National Portrait Gallery.' Christian told her that, in one of them, she looked quite haughty. The Queen told him that was because Annigoni had asked her to stand and look out of a window. 'All she had to look at was a wall, and she ended up sort of straining to see what was over it.'

He also told her he thought the NPG Annigoni made her look a little like a Red Indian. 'She laughed at that.' Their banter is echoed in Christian's portrait. His Queen is elegant and regal, but around her mouth and eyes plays a slight, suggestive flicker of a smile. 'It seemed to have a life of its own,' he says of the picture's shifting expression.

'When she laughed, you could see a different side to her — a more human aspect,' he says, admitting that he enjoyed amusing Britain's ruler. And this collision between a streetwise Merseysider and the monarch of all she surveys is what makes Christian's portrait such an intriguing work. Yet he maintains his next portrayal will be just as big an artistic challenge. 'Everybody's got something to offer for a portrait.'

The first royal sitting lasted 90 minutes, but for Christian it felt like about 10.

He was originally scheduled for only 60, but after an hour the 68-year-old patron asked her 28-year-old painter if he needed any more time. A week later, he returned for another (final) hour and a half. There were times during this second sitting when he completely forgot who he was painting. 'It's like riding a bicycle,' he says. 'If you think about it, you just fall off.' Forgetting who his subject was enabled him to depict her all the better. 'You just sort of look at it like an apple on a table.'

After that, he worked on his Queen nine hours a day for four weeks in his East End studio. None of the other artists in the building knew what he was up to. 'Sometimes when you're an artist, it's like growing potatoes in a cellar. You think, "What's the point in this?"'

While working on the painting, he worried about it being stolen — so he always locked it in his studio overnight — and the chance of a fire in the building. But he only panicked when he left it alone for a few moments in his car, albeit under wraps.

The day he finished it, he took it to his fiancée Emma's mother's house in Kingston upon Thames. Then the Queen's Private Secretary found his way from Buck House for a very private private view. The QPS didn't even have time for a cup of Christian's instant coffee, but the portrait itself received an unequivocal thumbs-up. Christian has been paid a four-figure fee, but he doesn't know what he'll be painting next, and he still hasn't got an agent.

And the experience hasn't changed his trenchantly monarchist views. 'It'd be a lot duller place without the Queen. If there wasn't the Queen, who would there be in her position? Can you imagine somebody like Neil Kinnock in that position? It just wouldn't be the same.'

It has, however, changed his aesthetic attitude to such mundane objects as the £5 note. 'They haven't really got it,' this blokeish young painter says of some of the many everyday depictions of the monarch. 'It's quite a difficult thing, getting a likeness of somebody. You shouldn't really attempt it if you can't do it properly.' For Christian Furr, whose painting will be formally unveiled on May 9, licking a first-class stamp may never feel the same again. ■

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